

*The Funeral*

the rabbi was my fault, that's definite, it was me insisting that it should be a young man, it was me, being self-important, playing the insider, saying that he was talented and must be given a chance to work, that he should bury my grandmother, my father's mother, because it's for her that the family was now gathering together, *di gantze mispoche* (minus the emigrants), all the friends and colleagues, those who came to laugh, the grateful survivors and the bored pensioners, the whole *kileh*, all gathering here next to the mortuary since nobody dares go in before the family and at the same time they cannot see how under the velvety surface of good manners their presence is a cruel interference with the life (or death) of a family, how every look of their eyes and every sentence they utter splinters the intimacy of the last hidden moments, but there is nothing to be done, they cannot be sent away, so we all step into the domed chamber, cold air grabs my back, even though the April sun is shining outside, its rays raking away the last remnants of winter, licking at the roof and the walls but the heat and the light don't come into the building and while in the depth of the cellar under the vaulted space there are bodies prepared for their funeral at some later time, one story higher, one step closer to the end of the ceremony are we, the closer family, placed according to a strict choreography on both sides of the open coffin, the women on one side, the men on the other, all on a small dais, as if on stage, and down there, in front of the ungainly coffin sit the viewers, the audience, *I hope they are not going to clap*, says a flash of despair in my brain, I push up closer to my father on the bench, I can feel that he is shaking, leaning forward, from the back half profile I can only see his hat, sitting funnily on the top of his head, the rim cannot take hold on the thick curly hair over his round face, it is just balancing there, to avoid falling off, but his body is shaking and I feel paralyzed, even though he is crying in front of these inquisitive eyes, he should at least cover his face so they cannot see him, it's shameful after all, and what is most annoying is that he is crying in front of me, after all you should never see your father cry, but then who else could he

cry in front of, this is absurd, and I can't even move, I would be hurt if he shifted away and I don't really know how he would react to a gesture of sympathy, but my hand is already there on his back, whatever happens, but nothing does, he is still shaking with sobs, I lean forward, and at last he buries his face in his right hand, but he is sobbing like a child, the still moment is a scandal and I am helpless, I do not know my role, what I can do and what I should do, up here, on the stage, in the crossfire of peeping eyes, where in a moment we become degraded to secondary characters when the cantor begins to sing and the rabbi fills his lungs with air, getting ready for his funeral address, head up, stomach in, chest out, there he goes, starting already, speaking freely, wanting to impress, he was taking notes eagerly a couple of days ago when, preparing for the occasion, he had a talk with my mother and my father who then lengthily enumerated all the stages of my grandmother's life story, the relatives "who must be mentioned," friends "who were so close to her," and now he does not even look at his notes, a top of the class student at his exam, confusing, without a flicker of the eye, relatives, names and facts, a sister's heroism with a cousin's barely convincing sympathy, so that the unworthy are elevated and those who remained loyal get barely a mention, and my face is burning as I seek out my mother's eyes where she is sitting, chewing her lips, over in the circle of female relatives, watching with frightened and motionless eyes the irredeemable happen, around her those concerned are looking our way with unmoving waxen eyes like figures in a gallery, I cautiously look at my father, his hat slid back, his tears all spent, his eyes round with amazement, shaking his head disapprovingly, a grain of sand creaking in the machinery of mourning, as if he was saying life is a series of *tsoretes* and my stomach cramps up with the thought of: why did I push, since the rabbi is my fault, that is definite, now he waves his arm, conducting, we must all stand up, a crowd of people, all leaving now, while the coffin is dragged onto a handcart, the iron-shod wooden wheels rattling along the chipped cobbles of the little pathway, the whole structure wobbling, so that the gravediggers must hold on to it on both sides, as though the cantor was praying in his broken voice for the coffin not to fall off instead of offering his monotonous song to guide the dead soul to the kingdom of *Sheol* where the voice would lead it like a flickering candle, if the song was not drowned in the whirlpool, the flotsam of

agitated conversations, because the one-armed woman, my grandmother's sister, whose body was torn on the ramp at Birkenau and whose noble generosity the rabbi attributed to another relative while she was only mentioned briefly and in passing, is now gesticulating fiercely and, filtered through her thick fur hat, I catch the scraps of her tearful laments, reprimanding my mother who is entreating her not to do it here and now, please, to stop, they can discuss it afterwards, but can she please wait until the ceremony is over, then giving up she steps back to my father, takes his arm, I join them too, we stand beside her, one on each side and walk off slowly, silently arm in arm, while I feel I could kill the one-armed woman for making a scene even though she is right and it is ultimately my fault, it was me insisting that the rabbi should be a young man, it was me being self-important, saying that he was talented and then he ends up causing all this trouble, I am seething with pent up anger looking for its object, but now we are standing around the grave, surrounding the stone slab under which rest the ashes of my grandmother's parents, because "I want to rest at my parents' feet" my grandmother used to say always, and so she will unless the earth collapses because they had to dig her grave in under the other two and there is no guarantee that if it goes in at all in the first place, the soil will hold up the earlier vault with the heavy granite sheet, now that it has been disturbed, and now another problem, they will have to shift the coffin sideways into the cavity under the stone, and the coffin, laden with the heavy body always gets stuck, giving trouble to the gravediggers, but at least they are not cold as they try to stuff into the ground *the box containing my grandmother*, this is a powerful woman fighting a rear-guard action, her last struggle for this world, she will not be easily ousted from life, everyone is watching keenly, exchanging whispers now and then, my parents' faces terrified, please, let nothing go wrong, please let this agony come to an end now, finally the coffin reaches the ground with a heavy jerk of the head-end on the cold, hard clay wall so that my mother and father wince almost in unison, but it is in now, finally the other end goes in as well, they offer the shovel, kaddish? asks the rabbi, but my father declines it, he can start, and indeed the rabbi starts, *Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'may rabo*, while the clumps of earth keep falling, *hallowed and praised be His name*, he just goes on and on, *in this world which He created according to His will*, although he

has nothing to do with the deceased, *and may He build His kingdom in your lives and your days*, not with anyone, dead or alive, *and in the life of the whole of the house of Israel, in the future and in the days to come*, there is no personal intimacy, *and say unto this: Amen*, only merciless beauty, *may His great Name be blessed for all eternity and into eternity, for ever and ever*, and faithfulness, *may He be hallowed and praised*, in the face of everything, *honored and glorified*, again and again, *reverenced and exalted*, repeatedly shown, *may the Name of the Holy One be worshipped and hallowed*, when you are defrauded by your neighbor, *may He be blessed who dwells in glory*, by your ally, *higher than all the blessings and song, praise and solace that may be uttered in this world*, because he is the only one, *and say unto this: Amen*, and thus the conditions are uneven, *may there be plentiful peace from heaven and life unto us and to the whole of Israel*, but we say it, we must say it, *and say unto this: Amen*, for this very reason, *He who brings peace in the highness may bring peace to us and the whole of Israel*, and so may it be inscribed in the book of eternal life, *and say unto this: Amen*, Händele bat Chana, the rabbi pronounces my grandmother's Hebrew name in careful, sonorous syllables and they are already thudding the side of the grave flat and straight where it had been opened and covered again, a shiver runs down my spine, as it does every time I think of immobility, the *immovability* down there, under the tons of earth, even if the boards are not nailed together and even in spite of my desperate faith that the bones will one day set out on their way to Jerusalem I know that *it is nasty* down there, even worse than up here where friends and strangers offer to shake hands so that I dive into the crowd, trying to disappear, far from the family, far from them, whom I have at least something to do with, because that is really more than I can put up with, grabbing my hand, shaking it heartily or with a short masculine shake or groping at it with slimy softness and whispering in my ears their hot-breathed *Please-take-my-condolences*, or perhaps just nodding their heads with gritted teeth, *I-know-how-you-feel*, no way, no, my pain is mine, I know all those who are also hurt by all this and that is enough, I do not need the spice of words now, leave me the immaterial medium of silence, the only possibility of contact with worlds other or beyond or over, with them that live and survive in them, where there are no tips like this that my father now puts in the palms of the gravediggers who have been on tenterhooks about it for several minutes and who now, at

long last, and with frequent bowing, finally abandon us, to leave us a minute or two, some time for pottering around the grave, those minutes when you do not want to go yet although there is nothing left to do and you must hurry because the *wider* family are already approaching the gate, we are trying to catch them up to invite them to my grandmother's flat where sandwiches, drinks, cakes and sweets are awaiting, carefully prepared, the guests of the "burial feast," this is barbaric I say to my mother, why don't they all go home, but she calls after them, not even reacting to what I say, repressing what she wanted to say, just waving to the others to wait until we catch them up at the gate of the cemetery, but she cannot even utter her words of invitation because, as if a bottle were unplugged, all ceremoniousness ends here, anger hisses and scratches as all the repressed tension bursts forth, lead by the one-armed woman, my grandmother's sister, who screams in a high voice, that it was deliberate, it was done on purpose, she had always known, had always felt they disliked her, and that we had bribed the rabbi or deliberately misinformed him, she screams in a half cry while my mother backs away bending forward slightly, her hands pressed on her breast, laughing hysterically, on the edge of snapping, good job my father is still busy paying the rabbi, out of ear-shot, and most of the family have said good bye and left, of course my mother must not be left alone so I, too, contribute a few rather angry words so that my mother ends up pacifying me, then suddenly everybody falls silent, the rabbi, who is my fault, this is definite, is coming out, it was me being self-important, playing the insider, saying he was talented, insisting that it should be a young man and now he passes among us as though he were the Word itself and even asks whether we were "quite contented" with his speech but soon comes to regret his enquiries because the next minute the one-armed woman answers him and even though he cannot really make out what went wrong he becomes part of the whole shouting match from which I softly withdraw to look out for my father, perhaps he has gone back to the grave I am trying telepathically to tell him not to come, he is really the last one to need this row at the end of which the offended person will declare no forgiveness and only my mother and the rabbi will be left standing in the doorway, thinking how the whole error could be set right, and finally they will agree that the rabbi is to describe in a letter what had happened,

apologizing for his error but now he must say good bye and be off, and we are leaving also, I must catch my train, my mother and father are staying behind to sort out some of the paperwork, but I must go home, away, away from this town where I no longer have any reason to come, except for remembrance of course but the day is still not over since, after I tell my mother and father to go and not wait at the railway station and I lean my head against the cool glass of the carriage, staring out, and the train heaves itself into motion with a heavy, breathless puffing, at that moment I see the rabbi arriving, running in his black suit and his curly-rimmed bowler hat, catching the same train back to the city but I quickly look the other way, turn round, sit down, tug the curtain, everything to avoid him seeing me, to make sure he does not come to sit here and to avoid having to talk to him, since I even feel slightly guilty towards him, which is why I hide my face behind the smoky material and fall softly asleep to the increasingly rhythmical rattle of the train but still see before my eyes my mother and my father entering the musty flat, my mother pottering nervously, but then, admitting its pointlessness, give it up, sit down, then stand up again, sigh and begin to take stock of all the things that must be given away or thrown away while my father, not knowing what to do with himself, floats about, slightly embarrassed like a shy stranger at a party, until he comes to the tray of sandwiches waiting for the guests, he reaches out a hesitant hand, selecting two pieces, putting them on a plate, methodically preparing, taking a table napkin, biting the sandwich with gusto, this is nice, he says to my mother, his face filling out, then, suddenly looking caught out, he tries to hide a childish smile, he is ashamed of himself, grinding his mouthful of food while, like feverish, broken eyes the lead crystal glasses glitter sadly on the tea-trolley.

*Translated from the Hungarian by Orsolya Frank*